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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates whether the 1976 presidential debates contributed to political participation among all sectors of American society. Evidence was obtained from 353 eligible voters in Madison, Wisconsin, before and after the debates. Effects were evaluated by taking correlations between the level of respondents' exposure to the debates and other media sources and 27 post-debate participation variables. These variables were broadly categorized into five areas: attention and interest, information gain, degree of political participation, strengthening of democratic system values, and changes in vote decision. Equivalence of effect among social sectors was determined by analyzing results for groups according to similarity in age, educational background, and political impact. Results show that debate watching had weak positive effects on participation (voter turnout or campaign activity). Its main impact was indirect through stimulation of discussion and interest in following the media's analyses of the debates. Newspaper readers increased their participation during the debate period, especially among groups who were usually less politically active. Television news viewing and campaign advertising recall had weaker effects. (Author/AV)

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THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES AND THE EQUIVALENCE OF INFORMED POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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The 1976 Presidential Debates and the
Equivalence of Informed Political Participation

There is a justifiable temptation to treat the 1976 Presidential debates as historic media events. For the first time in 16 years and for only the second time in history, a confrontation of the two major presidential candidates was brought directly to the American people by the media. In the excitement of finding out "who won" the contests and how they may have affected the vote, we should not lose sight of our responsibility to systematically evaluate the debates as forms of political communication having potential impact on the political system beyond any immediate effect on the particular election outcome.

Two major problems combine to frustrate attempts at systematic evaluation of the debates. First, there is an almost limitless number of audience reactions that might have implications for the social system. This abundance of potential effects thus requires a careful specification of a limited number of criteria to serve as standards for evaluation. The second problem arises from the complexity of the debates as sources of effects. Their highly salient format set off various behaviors, reactions and communication processes whose influence should be investigated along with the effects of debate watching. In addition, the debates were only one among many sources of campaign information and their impact in comparison with these sources must be considered.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

The evaluation research task was to identify functional requirements for the social system and to develop appropriate ways of measuring these requirements. In short, what did we hope the debates would accomplish; for whom; and, how would we know if they did so? Normative democratic political theory suggests that societal institutions can be judged on the basis of how well they facilitate broadly based and well informed participation in the political decision making process (Lasswell, 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Verba and Nie, 1972; Wright, 1975).[1]

If we are willing to further assume that the present state of American political life can be characterized as having wide disparities in the level of participation between various sets of status categories, we can say that sources of political communication can be judged by their contribution to the participation of less active sectors of society. The research question then becomes: did the debates contribute to the quantity and quality of political participation among all sectors of society? While this is not likely to be universally accepted as an adequate criterion, particularly by elite democratic political theorists (Lipset, 1963), it is at least clear enough to illustrate our approach to the problem. We call this criterion the equivalence of informed political participation.

Informed Political Participation Measurement of informed political participation can be approached through consideration of various functions that political communication might serve for individuals. Five such functions can be seen as leading directly or indirectly to informed political participation: (1) to stimulate interest (gain attention, motivate); (2) to inform (increase knowledge); (3) to stimulate participation (campaigning, likelihood of voting); (4) to facilitate decision-making (clarify issues and images, establish vote preferences); and (5) to strengthen attachment to the more abstract political system (values of efficacy and trust).

Equivalence. To the extent that the debates fostered informed political participation, it is necessary to estimate the equivalence or evenness of such effects across status groups. Equivalence is complicated by the fact that it is a distributional property of the political system and, hence, cannot be inferred from individual behavior alone. In this respect the investigation of equivalence resembles research testing the knowledge gap hypothesis which asserts that the mass media often act to increase the discrepancies in knowledge between the more and the less advantaged sectors of society (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, 1970; Robinson, 1972; Donohue, Tichenor and Olien, 1975).

Our examination of equivalence does however, differ from the knowledge gap literature in several ways. The primary difference lies in the scope of the criterion variables for which equalization effects are considered. Whereas the knowledge gap literature has been restricted to an examination of the equalization of information holding, information holding, as indicated above, represents only one of five criterion variables in the present study. These additional variables will enable us to examine equivalence at several stages of a complex behavioral sequence.

A second difference derives from our inclusion of several media sources, in addition to the debates, to be used for comparative purposes. While it is important to determine whether or not the debates had equalizing effects, it is just as important from a policy standpoint to determine whether or not these equalizing effects were any greater or less than those of conventional political communication sources.

The present study also differs from the knowledge gap research in going beyond the division of the sample by education to examine the gap between the young and the old and between the politically interested and the politically uninterested. The use of contingent sub-groups may help to avoid the confounds that are inherent in a single division, such as the instrumentality of the information, its availability, and the ability of groups to decode the information.

A final difference from the knowledge gap research lies in the use here of a longitudinal research design. The majority of knowledge gap studies are cross sectional in design and therefore yield, at best, correlational evidence. Seldom is a control for the prior level of knowledge included. Our panel data provides for comparative tests of knowledge <u>gain</u> (along with increments in other participation measures) in relation to exposure to communication sources within educational, age, and interest levels. This allows for more direct tests of communication effects gap hypotheses.

We can assert equivalence in the present study if we can show that the debates contributed as much or more to the participation of groups usually less active in

politics as they did to those with higher participation rates. We have used age, education and political interest for equivalence analyses since each has been consistently found to be a strong predictor of political participation (Milbrath and Goel, 1977; Verba and Nie, 1972). If debate effects are less among the young, the lesser educated and the less interested, then we can infer support for extending the knowledge hap hypothesis to the debates. On the other hand, if we find stronger or equal effects among the less participatory groups, then we might infer that the debates had consequences of equalizing social status differences and socializing these low participation groups into the political system.

DEBATES AS FORMS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Treating the debates as unique "media events" is likely to divert attention from the fact that they were by no means the only source of campaign information. Long before the first debate in September, the standard print and electronic news sources were providing information about the candidates and the campaign. Complete coverage had been devoted to the political campaigns earlier in the summer and the full onslaught of political advertising was about to be felt. This implies that we should examine the more complicated questions of comparative evaluation in order to assess the role of each information source in the political process.

Certain aspects of the debate format seem to be uniquely relevant to the question of equivalence. First, the fact that the debates occupied several hours of prime-time television under virtual monopoly conditions (except for cable television) implies the likelihood of much higher viewing levels than is common to other formats. Only the coverage of the political conventions approached these ideal conditions. Prime-time coverage meant that heavy television viewers who do not customarily pay much attention to public affairs may have been induced to watch. The excitement of the debates as spectator contests may have added to the audience. These factors should make equivalence or compensatory equivalence more likely because the less participatory groups would be drawn into the audience.

Another attribute of the debates that may have had consequences for equivalence is their high level of visibility. The advance publicity and post-event analyses associated with the debates was likely to set off public discussion and scrutiny not common to other information sources whose impact is more dispersed over time. This makes the debates an extremely complex set of events and implies that we look beyond the level of exposure to other social processes connected with the debates to determine their impact. This attribute should also mean greater impact on the less participatory categories, at least relative to the less focused standard sources of information.

STUDY DESIGN

Hour long personal interviews were conducted with 353 eligible voters in Madison, Wisconsin during late October of 1976. Since the main purpose of our larger research program was to analyze the political communication of young voters, persons under 27 years old were over-represented in all samples. A month earlier, a week before the first debate, 97 of the respondents were interviewed by telephone. Another portion of the main sample included 133 respondents who had been interviewed during the off-year Congressional election in October, 1974. Finally, 323 of the main sample were contacted by telephone in the weeks following the November, 1976 election. The two panels constitute the data sets examined here.

Our research strategy called for the examination of debate effects in five areas with several measures within each: attention and interest (campaign interest, campaign discussion, watching election returns); information gain (accuracy of the two candidates position on eight issues); participation (vote probability, campaign activity, turnout); strengthening of system values (political efficacy, trust, and party strength); and changes in vote decision (vote intention, issue proximity, image favorability). Seventeen of the 26 criteria were non-partisan in that it could be said that increases in their levels represented gains in overall participation. The nine remaining items were partisan in that the strength but not the direction of the

relationship was relevant to participation. For example, net change toward either Carter or Ford could be counted as a partisan effect of debate watching, but only an increase in non-partisan campaign discussion was credited.

Debate watching was measured by summing viewing levels across the first three debates as reported on a four-point scale. Five other debate variables were also included: level of attention, discussion with other people, following debate analyses in various media, evaluation of debate helpfulness, and the perceptions of who won. Four other media sources were used for comparison: television news, entertainment television, television advertising, and newspaper public affairs content. All media measures were based on self report except for advertising which was indexed by the number of political ads recalled. We did not expect watching of entertainment television shows to increase informed participation, but we included it for control purposes.

Within two levels of age, education and political interest, correlation coefficients were computed between the ten media source variables and the post-debate levels of each of the 26 criterion variables. Partial coefficients were then computed by controlling for either the 1974 or 1976 pre-debate measures, whichever was available for a given criterion. The partial coefficients constitute the critical data for analysis of source equivalance.

RESULTS

For the purposes of this study, the effectiveness of an information source can be evaluated by three standards: predictive power, consistency of prediction, and equivalance. That is, how well does it predict gains in participation, how consistently is it associated with gains rather than losses in participation, and how equivalent is the strength of relationship distributed among the subgroups customarily low and high in political participation.

PREDICTIVE POWER

Predictive power, as shown in Table 1, is indexed in our summary statistics by the mean proportion of variance accounted for by the indicated source across the

various attributes of informed participation.[2] For non-partisan items where the direction of relationship is meaningful, only positive predictions of participation are included in the averaging. Since the details of debate effects are available elsewhere (McLeod, Bybee, Durall and Ziemke, 1977; McLeod, Durall, Ziemke and Bybee, in press) we will focus only on the broad patterns and summary statistics here.

The strength of debate watching effects was not overwhelming in accounting for two percent of variance in both non-partisan and partisan measures (Table 1). This is not to say the watching of debates had no effect. It did seem to stimulate campaign interest, campaigning activity (but not turnout), and raise partisanship as a system value. Among the nine partisan measures, it had the effect of reducing the issue distance between viewers and Carter largely through bringing their own views into line with the perception of where Carter stood. But our previous research has shown that the greatest impact of debate viewing was <u>indirect</u> through the stimulation of discussion of debate viewing and other post-debate processes and cognitions (McLeod, et al., 1977; McLeod et al., in press). Those watching the debates more paid closer attention to them, discussed them more often, were more likely to follow their analyses in the media, and to evaluate them more highly than were those who viewed less of the debates. Among the young, the amount of debate viewing was also related to perceiving that Carter won the debates.

Among these other debate variables, the amount of attention to the debates was also related to increased campaign interest and discussion and campaign activity. It appears that debate attention also affected the partisan vote direction in the same manner as debate viewing by increasing the proximity of issues between the viewer and Carter.

Table 1 also shows the strong impact of debate discussion on the attention paid to the campaign. Those discussing the debates became more interested and increased their level of discussion of political topics outside the debates. They showed mixed effects on participation by increasing campaigning activity but conversely became

less likely to vote on election day. In partisan areas, discussion benefited Carter by strengthening Democratic party affiliation and by moving respondents toward Carter in vote preferences. This pro-Democratic effect of discussion may be contingent on the fact that our study was done in a liberal community whose pre-debate reactions were characterized by a coolness toward both candidates.

Following analyses of the debates in the media was related to an increase in informed participation in several areas (Table 1). It was strongly associated with gains in campaign interest and with campaigning activity and, perhaps most importantly, with increased knowledge of the candidates' positions on issues. Following of these analyses did not lead to strengthening of system values, however. In partisan areas, it was rather clearly associated with a weakening of evaluation of Ford without a corresponding strengthening of enthusiasm for Carter.

Favorable evaluation of the helpfulness of the debates seemed to play a more selective role in stimulating participation. While the more enthusiastic respondents did increase their discussion of the campaign, they showed no increment on political knowledge (Table 1). They also were more likely to participate in campaigning activity and to show strengthened values of political trust and efficacy. Perceiving the debates as helpful also benefited Carter in partisan areas, largely through improving his image without affecting that of Ford.

Not surprisingly, perceiving Carter as having won the debates strongly helped him on the vote direction measures (Table 1). This was manifested in both the issue and image areas. Less obvious is the finding that seeing Carter as the debate winner was associated with increased attention to the campaign, with a gain in knowledge of where each candidate stood on the issues, and with heightened participation in the campaign.

The overall finding, as shown in the lower block of Table 1, is that the average predictive power of the other debates variables (3.1% non-partisan, 4.9% partisan) overshadows the impact of debate watching per se (2.0% non-partisan, 1.9% partisan). Among the standard media sources, we see from the third column of the lower half of Table 1 that television news viewing is intermediate in predictive power in being

stronger than debate watching but less strong than the average of the other debate variables. While the television news viewers tended to increase their campaign interest and participation during the debate period, they did not appear to pick up information about where the candidates stood on issues. In partisan areas, they were somewhat more likely than others to move toward Carter, particularly in terms of image characteristics.

Entertainment television was included for control purposes. We can see from Table 1 that it had little relationship to participation. Recall of campaign advertising does somewhat better (2.1% non-partisan, 1.5% partisan) showing modest relationships to information gain and strengthened efficacy and stronger ties to gains in campaigning activity and turnout.

Newspaper public affairs reading has the most impressive predictive power among the standard media sources (3.6% non-partisan, 3.0% partisan in Table 1). The frequent "hard news" readers showed sharply increased levels of interest and discussion along with gains in information and campaigning activity. System values was the only area where a weak relationship emerged. News reading also had a partisan outcome helping Carter in voting preferences. This effect appeared to be more one of the avid readers lowering their evaluation of Ford during the debate period rather than strengthening Carter's attributes. Overall, then the predictive power of newspaper news was stronger than debate watching and rather comparable to the strength of processes stimulated by watching.

CONSISTENCY

In the analysis of predictive power of the 17 non-partisan items, we dealt only with relationships in the direction of participation. It is also possible that exposure to an information source can be associated with lower participation levels. For that reason, it is important to consider the consistency or purity of the prediction for the non-partisan items. The results are summarized in Table 2. The first column indicates that 92% of the variance accounted for by debate watching

across the 17 measures was in the direction of increased participation. The range is from 80% for the three system value measures to 100% for the three Attention measures. It appears, then that although the effects of debate watching were not very strong they were overwhelmingly consistent in the direction of participation.

Four of the other five debate variables in Table 2 were moderately consistent (80% to 84%). Only the favorable evaluation of the debates was relatively inconsistent in prediction (62%) largely through a failure of enthusiasm to lead to information gain. Attention, Following Analyses and Debate Winner seemed to be inconsistent with respect to bolstering system values while Discussion's weakness appeared in the failure to increase participation.

Among the standard media sources, Entertainment Television more frequently predicted to lower participation (30% consistent) while newspaper news reading (82%), television news (81%) and television advertising recall (79%) were moderately consistent. Their weaknesses were diversely distributed: system values for newspaper reading (55%), information gain for television news (65%), and attention and interest for television advertising.

Since the strengths and weaknesses in both power and consistency tended to be distributed differently for various sources across the areas of participation, we may be able to argue for non-redundancy of source effects. That is, the various standard sources and debate variables seem to make somewhat different contributions to informed political participation.

EQUIVALENCE

Our research began with an assumption that informed political participation would be unequally distributed across our age, education and political interest sub-groups. This proved to be the case in our sample no less than in the considerable body of previous research. In the pre-debates interviews, our older, more educated, and more politically interested respondents paid more attention to the campaign, were better informed on issues, were more active and had stronger system values.

We further assumed that these same types of people also use the standard television and newspaper news sources more than others. We speculated that the debates and the processes they generated might be more evenly distributed than the standard formats. This possibility is examined in Table 3. The entries are t-values for the differences between the levels of age, education and political interest in their use of various sources and processes. This was repeated in each of our two panels.

In the age comparisons, we can see that older respondents use television and newspaper news more than do the young. Debate watching, by comparison, appears less selective although there was some tendency for older people to view them more. Similar patterns can be seen for Attention and Following Analyses. For the most part, however, the strength of the other debate variables are relatively equivalent with respect to age. Alone among all source variables, the recall of televised political ads was somewhat more common among the young.

Education comparisons are even more disappointing for debate watching (Table 3). Here the tendency for higher debate viewing by the higher educated is even more pronounced than for television or newspaper news. Similarly, the more educated were more likely to discuss the debates and to see Carter as winning them. The strong tendency for the less educated to watch entertainment television also can be noted, along with the equivalence of television news viewing.

Table 3 also shows a high level of selective debate watching for the political interest comparisons. Those already interested in politics were more likely to watch the debates, to pay more attention to them, to discuss them, to follow them in media analyses, to find them more helpful (1974-76 panel only), and to see Carter as winning them. Political interest also shows strong differences in the reading of political news in the newspaper and in the recall of campaign ads, but shows no appreciable differences for the other two television measures.

In general, the results in Table 3 offer little encouragement to the proposition that the debate format would improve on standard news formats in reaching the less

participatory segments of the society. While a very high proportion of our sample watched at least some of the debates, the depth of their viewing was more selective by high education and interest than was the case for television news watching. The reading of political news in the paper is not noticeably more selective than was debate watching in our sample. Other debate variables also tend to bring stronger reactions from the more educated and interested respondents. Only with respect to age do we get some hint of greater use equivalence for debates.

If the debates failed to provide equivalence by use and reaction, they still may have generated equivalence of effect. This possibility is indexed by the equivalence coefficients in Table 4. These equivalence coefficients are formed by taking the variance accounted for by a given source variable within the less participatory sub-group (young, less educated, less interested), summing across a given area (e.g., attention and interest), and then dividing by the sum of variance accounted for within both sub-groups. For example, 41% of the total variance in attention and interest accounted for by debate watching in both age categories combined was predicted among the young. An even balance or perfect equivalence would be .50. Coefficients below (say) .35 would indicate serious nonequivalence in that the largest gain would take place in the more participatory category (older, high education, high interest) thereby contributing to an "effects gap." Coefficients over .65 would indicate compensatory equivalence in closing the gap by differentially benefiting the less participatory group.

The Debate Watching non-partisan and partisan totals in Table 4 show its effects were relatively equivalent for age (.54, .44), somewhat nonequivalent for education (.35, .24), and were compensatory in equivalence for interest (.61, .62). Thus, equivalence varies considerably across the three comparisons. It is apparent that equivalence varies by participation criterion as well. Debate Watching effects are somewhat nonequivalent for campaign attention and interest (.41, .30, .41) and for system values (.35, .47, .00), but such information as they conveyed seemed to reach the less participatory younger (.75) and less politically interested (.81) respondents.

Debate Attention effects are equivalent or better over all, but are nonequivalent for education (.22) and interest (.31) in the area of campaign attention and interest area where its effects was strongest (Table 4). Discussion is also somewhat nonequivalent (.41, .33, .37) in this same area where its effects are strongest. It also acts to widen the participation gap. Here its relationship to gains in participation and strengthened system values are largely confined to the politically interested respondents. The effects of Following Analyses show compensatory equivalence; being stronger among the less educated and less interested. But, on the other hand, they are nonequivalent in being stronger among the older respondents.

Favorable evaluation of the debates shows equivalent or better effects in Table 4 for all averages except for the non-partisan age comparisons. The final debate measure, Debate Winner, varies in equivalence. Its relatively strong relationships to attention and information gain are decidedly nonequivalent for education but compensatory in equivalence with respect to political interest. The reverse situation holds for its equally strong ties to participation. Its strongest effects on voting decisions are nonequivalent in affecting the preferences of older voters but are equivalent or better on the other two groups.

The equivalence of debate watching and the other debate variables are compared with standard sources in Table 5. Television news, which was supposed to be a contributor to the effects gap, reveals equivalence or compensatory equivalence on each of the six average non-partisan and partisan comparisons. It has higher equivalence coefficients than does Debate Watching on 16 of the 18 area comparisons and does almost as well when compared with the average of the other debate variables. Entertainment viewing shows high compensatory equivalence for education, but as shown in Tables 1 and 2, its predictive power is weak and inconsistent. Advertising recall effects also tend to be stronger in the less participatory groups, although it is only equivalent in information gain.

The results for Newspaper News are perhaps the most surprising of all. Compensatory equivalence is shown for information gain in all three comparisons and for

average non-partisan participation gains for the less educated and less politically interested respondents. Only for the age comparisons for campaign attention and interest, participation and for system values are there indications of newspaper use contributing to the effects gap. In general, however, the results indicate that the reading of political news acted to reduce the discrepancies in participation attributable to age, education and political interest.

CONCLUSIONS

The research question addressed in this study was: did the debates contribute to the quantity and quality of political participation among all sectors of society? If we consider only the extent of exposure to the debates, we can respond only with a highly qualified affirmative answer. Debate Watching per se had small if consistent relationships to participation, largely in the form of gains in campaign interest, campaigning activity, partisanship and in their shifting of issue positions. But the influence of debate watching was lower in its direct effect on political behavior and higher in its indirect impact through the stimulation of social processes. Its importance was evident in bringing people to focus attention on the debates and to discuss them with others. The newsworthy nature and combative format may have led those who watched the debates most to follow media analyses and to form judgments about their quality and who won them. These other debate variables had their own effects that were, on the average, considerably stronger than those for debate watching. This should serve to underline the inadequacy of voting studies that treat media exposure as a simple set of stimuli measured by exposure time or by a dichotomous "use vs. non-use."

In varying ways, the other debate variables contributed to the various areas of informed participation. Increased interest in the campaign was related to all debate variables, but particularly to debate discussion and attention. Information gain about the candidates' stand on issues was associated with following media analyses and perceiving Carter as the winner. Increased campaigning also was tied to seeing Carter as winning, and also to discussion and perceived hlepfulness. The latter

factors also contributed to the maintainence of system values. Partisan vote decision making and value changes were associated with several variables, but particularly with the perception of who won the debates. The diversity of effects found to be related to the various debate variables reflects a research strategy that departs from traditional concerns that have focused almost exclusively on the persuasive impact on vote decisions. Not only do these traditional approaches ignore such critical electoral behaviors as vote turnout, but they underplay the potential function of media in election campaigns in socializing new voters and renewing the older voters' values and commitment to the political system.

Our results also warn against understating the importance of traditional information sources in political campaigns. Newspaper news appeared to be the most important among these; contributing strongly to interest in the campaign, information gain and to partisan voting decisions. Television news produced less strong relationships but did show strong associations with gains in interest and participation. Television advertising, as indexed by the recall of campaign ads, also played a role in contributing modestly to campaign interest, information gain and participation. Each of these traditional sources appeared to play a somewhat different role in enhancing informed participation.

The implications of this research for the growing "knowledge gap" literature are considerable. First, it appears essential to distinguish between the <u>equivalence of use</u> of a given source across status levels and the <u>equivalence of effect</u> for that source. For example, both debate watching and newspaper news reading were nonequivalent in that each had a disproportionate share of its audience among the more educated and politically interested respondents. To some extent, they were also discriminatory in attracting the older voters more strongly. On the other hand, both debate watching and newspaper news tended to be equivalent or better in their effects in having relatively strong impact on the less participatory groups. Despite having equivalent strength of prediction for the low and high participatory groups, a given source could still contribute to a <u>widening</u> effects gap if it is nonequivalent

in use. That may have happened here with the debate variables and newspaper news, but at least most of our informed participation criterion measures show larger net gains for the less participatory categories. An inspection of the variances and ranges of the various items leads us to tentatively reject the alternative explanation that the lower gain among the high participation group may reflect a measurement ceiling (Ettema and Kline, 1977).

The nonequivalence of use shown by debate watching leads to the pessimistic conclusion that opportunity for exposure will not automatically lead to a lowering of the "media use gap." The near-monopoly presentation of the debates during prime time coupled with heavy advance publicity did lead to a wide audience in terms of watching at least some portion of the debates, but their easy availability did not sustain the attention of the less participatory segments of the audience. Structural factors of age and education played a role in determining the depth of debate viewing, but the best predictors were the person's existing patterns of public affairs media use. This raises the question of how much the debates added to the contribution of the traditional sources. Our initial analyses indicate that the debates and their resulting processes were far from being redundant sources of information, but much closer analyses will be needed to justify this assertion.

Despite the limits of sample size, the characteristics of the population studied, and less than optimal measurement, our analyses of effect equivalence have implications for knowledge gap research. Tables 4 and 5 show a substantial variation in equivalence coefficients among the various effect criterion areas. In looking across the various source effects, it is clear that information gain effects were compensatory as reflected in their high equivalence coefficients. At the other extreme, nonequivalence is indicated for system value in most age and interest comparisons. The variation in equivalence rates suggests that future research include other effects criteria in addition to the study of gaps in knowledge. Along with other evidence, it also indicates that gains in knowledge do not guarantee the utilization of that information in other forms of participation. Theories of knowledge gaps

might go beyond this single criterion to conceptualize the modification of equivalence as involving a series of changes in various participation criteria.

The equivalence coefficients also show considerable variation among the age, education and political interest comparisons within various source and effect areas. This implies that a given source may have no inherent or totally general quality that increases or reduces the effects gap. Rather, the degree of effect equivalence for a source may depend upon the social structural basis of nonparticipation. In general, it appears that the political interest comparisons produced the highest equivalence coefficients and age the lowest. In any case, knowledge gap research might profitably go beyond the single contingency of education in data analysis to examine other criteria.

Our specific findings also have relevance for the knowledge gap literature. We anticipated that Debate Watching and the other debate variables would produce relatively equivalent effects among our contingency variables. With the exception of nonequivalence for Debate Watching in the education comparisons and for the average of the other debate variables on age, our findings supported this. What we did not anticipate was the compensatory equivalence shown for the traditional sources, television news, television advertising and newspaper news.

What reasons can we give for the compensatory equivalent effects of these traditional sources? One possibility is that election campaigns are highly salient events that generate conflict and levels of interpersonal processes and information seeking that have as their consequence the leveling out of effects gaps that characterize the between-election situation. This would be consonant with the findings of Donohue et al. (1975) that knowledge gaps tend to narrow when conflict is raised about community issues. It also fits our data that show relatively large participation gaps for the 1974 and pre-debate waves that tended to narrow in the post-debate interviews. If this reasoning holds, then election campaigns and the media that cover them do act to make the level of informed participation more equivalent. Our results indicate the debates added interest and a focus to the campaign that may have contributed to this objective.

NOTES

1. Normative theories of pluralistic democratic government set ideals or goals as to how the political system ought to operate as distinct from how it currently operates. Berelson sets the problem well in his Democratic Practice and Democratic Theory" chapter. The concept of equivalence is taken from Lasswell who invokes the principle of "equivalent enlightenment" as a realistic compromise between the perfectly shared knowledge goal implied by democratic theory and the realities of actual political discourse.

2. We have used summary tables that average across participation criteria in the examination of predictive power, consistency of prediction, and equivalence. This leaves out the specifics of relationship and statistical tests, but it does spare the reader the burden of wading through some 1,560 partial correlation coefficients (26 participation criteria x 10 sources x 2 levels of each of 3 contingency variables). In any case, the importance lies in the pattern of findings rather than in specific relationships.

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Table 1

Predictive Power of Debates and Other Sources: Average Variance Accounted for by Criterion Area and Type of Item

			Other Debate Variables				
Non-partisan Items		Debate Watching	Attention	Discussion	Followed Analyses	Evaluated Favorably	Debate Winner
Attention & Int.	(3)	.032	.072	.093	.043	.025	.040
Information Gain	(8)	.017	.021	.014	.040	.004	.043
Participation	(3)	.019	.025	.036	.026	.032	.041
System Values	(3)	.015	.005	.029	.006	.031	.010
Average	(17)	.020	.028	.034	.039	.017	.036
Partisan Items							
Vote Decisions	(5)	.025	.035	.028	.044	.048	.163
System Values	(4)	.011	.014	.034	.022	.031	.053
Average	(9)	.019	.026	.031	.034	.040	.114

				Television Viewing of:			
Non-partisan Items		Debate Watching	Ave. Other Debate Var.	News	Enter.	Advertising	Newspaper News
Attention & Int.	(3)	.032	.055	.053	.002	.020	.084
Information Gain	(8)	.017	.024	.013	.002	.024	.032
Participation	(3)	.019	.032	.024	.011	.023	.024
System Values	(3)	.015	.016	.015	.011	.015	.009
Average	(17)	.020	.031	.022	.005	.021	.036
Partisan Items							
Vote Decisions	(5)	.025	.064	.025	.021	.018	.041
System Values	(4)	.011	.031	.022	.021	.011	.016
Average	(9)	.019	.049	.024	.021	.015	.030

N = 94 for Attention, Information Gain and Vote Direction, 133 for Participation and System Values. Entries are the mean proportions of variance accounted for averaged across criterion measures. For non-partisan items, only prediction in a positive direction is included. The number of criterion variables included in the averaging is indicated by parentheses.

Table 2

Consistency of Direction in Predicting Participation by Debates and Other Sources:

Percent of Variance Accounted for in Predicted Direction by Criterion Area

Non-Partisan Items		Debate Watching	Other Debate Variables: Attention	Discussion	Followed Analyses	Evaluated Favorably	Debate Winner
Attention	(3)	1.00	.97	1.00	1.00	.84	.86
Information Gain	(8)	.91	.85	.85	.93	.28	.89
Participation	(3)	.97	.94	.68	.96	.95	1.00
System Values	(3)	.80	.34	.82	.32	.96	.44
Total	(17)	.92	.80	.84	.84	.62	.82

Non-Partisan Items		Debate Watching	Ave. Other Debate Var.	Television Viewing of: News	Enter.	Advertising	Newspaper News
Attention	(3)	1.00	.93	.98	.11	.44	.98
Information Gain	(8)	.91	.76	.65	.11	.89	.86
Participation	(3)	.97	.91	.92	.36	.91	.80
System Values	(3)	.80	.58	.94	.92	.77	.55
Total	(17)	.92	.78	.81	.30	.79	.82

Entries are the mean proportions of variance accounted for in the direction of informed participation divided by the total amount of variance accounted for by a given source variable. A coefficient of 1.00 indicates all of the variance accounted for is in the direction if informed participation. A .50 indicates half the variance predicted was in the opposite direction; lower coefficients identify variables related to lower rates of participation. Calculations are based on the 17 criterion items among a total of 26 that could be evaluated in terms of direction. The number of items included in the averaging within each criterion area is indicated in parentheses.

Table 3

Exposure to Debates, Debate Processes and Use of Other Sources: t-values for Differences Between Age, Education and Political Interest Levels

	Age		Education		Interest	
Source Variable	Pre-post Panel	1974-76 Panel	Pre-post Panel	1974-76 Panel	Pre-post Panel	1974-76 Panel
Debate Watching	1.92[c]	.87	3.31[a]	2.92[a]	2.38[b]	5.15[a]
Other Debate Variables						
Attention	1.50	.46	.88	2.09[b]	1.82[c]	3.81[a]
Discussion	-.96	-.45	2.59[a]	2.71[a]	3.69[a]	3.89[a]
Followed Analyses	.76	1.49	1.25	1.72[c]	2.41[b]	2.90[a]
Evaluated Favorably	-.48	.57	-1.52	-.98	1.54	2.95[a]
Debate Winner	-.51	.15	2.89[a]	3.48[a]	2.72[a]	3.62[a]
Other Sources						
Television News	3.72[a]	1.88[c]	-.77	-.61	1.27	1.88[c]
Television Entertainment	.31	.22	-5.52[a]	-5.40[a]	-1.84[c]	-.93
Television Advertising	-1.24	-1.92[c]	1.43	1.24	1.77[c]	3.32[a]
Newspaper News	1.80[c]	3.08[a]	3.10[a]	1.12	4.56[a]	6.22[a]

N = 94 for Pre-post panel, 133 for 1974-76 panel. Entries are t-values reflecting the difference between levels of age, education and interest with respect to source variables. A positive sign indicates the more participatory subgroup (older, high education, high interest) used the source more; higher used by a less participatory subgroup is shown by a negative sign. Significance is indicated: a=<.01; b=<.05; c=<.10, 2-tailed test.

Table 4

Levels of Equivalence of Effect for Criteria of Informed Political Participation:

Equivalence Coefficients for Debate Watching and Other Debate Variables

			Other Debate Variables				
		Debate Watching	Attention	Discussion	Followed Analyses	Evaluated Favorably	Debate Winner
Non-Partisan Items							
Attention and Interest	Age	.41	.71	.41	.06	.04	.25
	Education	.30	.22	.33	.78	.67	.02
	Interest	.41	.31	.37	.47	.68	.84
Information Gain	Age	.75	.60	.75	.52	*	.66
	Education	.50	.62	.29	.60	*	.12
	Interest	.81	.63	.70	.86	*	.56
Participation	Age	.38	.15	.53	.90	.69	.10
	Education	.13	.81	.74	.34	.99	.75
	Interest	.69	.93	.01	.39	.90	.07
System Values	Age	.35	.00	.18	.13	.20	.02
	Education	.47	.85	.91	.94	.56	.05
	Interest	.00	.00	.00	.00	.09	.01
Non-Partisan Average	Age	.54	.59	.48	.30	.25	.52
	Education	.35	.50	.54	.63	.58	.25
	Interest	.61	.52	.37	.68	.66	.51
Partisan Items							
Voting Decisions	Age	.35	.67	.41	.48	.88	.33
	Education	.21	.52	.12	.62	.60	.48
	Interest	.63	.67	.83	.74	.86	.59
System Values	Age	.65	.39	.54	.16	.08	.31
	Education	.27	.84	.19	.83	.92	.51
	Interest	.40	.70	.17	.62	.56	.31
Partisan Average	Age	.44	.61	.48	.38	.56	.33
	Education	.24	.63	.15	.68	.73	.49
	Interest	.62	.67	.51	.71	.77	.55
Overall Totals	Age	.51	.60	.44	.32	.44	.39
	Education	.32	.55	.45	.64	.64	.40
	Interest	.61	.57	.41	.69	.74	.53

N = 40 (young), 54 (older), 39 (low education), 55 (high education), 34 (low interest), 60 (high interest) for Attention, Voting Decisions, and Information Gain; 65 (young), 68 (older), 35 (low education), 98 (high education), 51 (low interest), 82 (high interest) for Participation and System Values. Equivalence coefficients represent the proportion of variance accounted for by the low participatory category relative to the variance accounted for by both the low and high categories. Proportion of variance is variance in post-debate measures accounted for after removal by partialing out of the pre-debate or 1974 levels of the dependent variables. An * indicates the base proportion of variance accounted for was too small (less than one percent) to produce reliable equivalence coefficients.

Table 5

Levels of Equivalence of Effect for Criteria of Informed Political Participation:

Equivalence Coefficients for Debate Watching and Other Sources of Information

		Debate Watching	Ave. Other Debate Var.	Television Viewing of: News	Enter.	Advertising	Newspaper News
Non-Partisan Items							
Attention and Interest	Age	.41	.41	.45	*	.95	.19
	Education	.30	.38	.56	*	.86	.72
	Interest	.41	.50	.58	*	.53	.39
Information Gain	Age	.75	.62	.72	*	.48	.74
	Education	.50	.37	.79	*	.46	.87
	Interest	.81	.69	.98	*	.48	.89
Participation	Age	.38	.47	.91	.97	.95	.19
	Education	.13	.78	.19	.85	.84	.15
	Interest	.69	.43	.70	.21	.82	.89
System Values	Age	.35	.17	.52	.61	.85	.01
	Education	.47	.74	.82	.18	.90	.67
	Interest	.00	.03	.77	.91	.14	.58
Non-Partisan Average	Age	.54	.44	.62	.77	.74	.43
	Education	.35	.50	.57	.72	.67	.67
	Interest	.61	.53	.76	.51	.55	.66
Partisan Items							
Voting Decisions	Age	.35	.46	.46	.26	.64	.51
	Education	.21	.49	.50	.56	.48	.38
	Interest	.63	.69	.49	.13	.57	.65
System Values	Age	.65	.33	.74	.08	.70	.41
	Education	.27	.65	.93	.82	.74	.80
	Interest	.40	.43	.72	.88	.73	.84
Partisan Average	Age	.44	.41	.57	.20	.67	.48
	Education	.24	.54	.71	.70	.58	.49
	Interest	.62	.63	.58	.58	.63	.69
Overall Totals	Age	.51	.42	.60	.32	.72	.45
	Education	.32	.52	.63	.71	.64	.62
	Interest	.61	.59	.67	.55	.57	.67

N = 40 (young), 54 (older), 39 (low education), 55 (high education), 34 (low interest), 60 (high interest) for Attention, Voting Decisions, and Information Gain; 65 (young), 68 (older), 35 (low education), 98 (high education), 51 (low interest), 82 (high interest) for Participation and System Values. Equivalence coefficients represent the proportion of variance accounted for by the low participatory category relative to the variance accounted for by both the low and high categories. Proportion of variance is variance in post-debate measures accounted for after removal by partialing out of the pre-debate or 1974 levels of the dependent variables. An * indicates the base proportion of variance accounted for was too small (less than one percent) to produce reliable equivalence coefficients.

Summary Table

Predictive Power, Consistency and Equivalence of Debates and Other Sources

	Debate Watching	Attention	Discussion	Followed Analyses	Evaluated Favorably	Debate Winner
Power: non-partisan	.020	.028	.034	.039	.017	.036
partisan	.019	.026	.031	.034	.040	.114
Consistency	.92	.80	.84	.84	.62	.82
Equivalence: (ave.)						
Age	.51	.60	.44	.32	.44	.39
Education	.32	.55	.45	.64	.64	.40
Interest	.61	.57	.41	.69	.74	.53

	Debate Watching	Ave. Other Debate Var.	Television viewing of: News		Advertising	Newspaper News
Power: non-partisan	.020	.031	.022	.005	.021	.036
partisan	.019	.049	.024	.021	.015	.030
Consistency	.92	.78	.81	.30	.79	.82
Equivalence: (ave.)						
Age	.51	.42	.60	.32	.72	.45
Education	.32	.52	.63	.71	.64	.62
Interest	.61	.59	.67	.55	.57	.67